

THE GHAN AND KIMBERLEY COAST

22nd September – 14th October, 2011



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We had long intended to travel on the Ghan from Adelaide to Darwin. When we heard of a much recommended Darwin to Broome cruise around the Kimberley Coast, we asked our travel agent to combine the two. She found Coral Princess Cruises, who do several cruises along the far north of Australia, including the Darwin to Broome leg. Thus, we were able to book two of the top Australian tours in one.

Adelaide

We spent a few days in Adelaide first. The touring maps were more complex than getting to the places they depict. Our journey through the Adelaide Hills seemed much more complicated than it actually was: you simply follow M1 and duck off for all the interesting sights: Eagles Nest, Mt Lofty Summit, Bridgewater, Hahndorf, Mt Barker, Lobethal, Birdwood, Gorge Road ... Not that we saw all these places. This was a taster, we now need to return and see it properly overnighting on the way.

Same for the Barossa and Clare Valleys. Tanunda in the Barossa was a terrific place: for scenery, German buildings, Lutheran churches and German food. Tanunda Bakery seemed ordinary enough but it was jam packed with locals. We found out why: the recipes for traditional German cakes and pastries had been imported over 150 years ago. Like Galapagos finches, the recipes had evolved into wonderful local subspecies. One could eat for a week in Tanunda Bakery, scoffing something wonderful and different each time.

Testosterone driven behavior is another example where local conditions have led to subspecies. The Adelaide species of hormone driven males hoon through traffic, tailgating, lane switching at high speed. In the hills on a public road, motorcyclists were timing each other along a strip of public narrow winding mountain road to see who could do it the fastest. The over-charged Hobart male species on the other hand hit each other, preferably with broken glass, or more recently, they shoot guns at houses.



Adelaide made me see Hobart through new eyes. Public areas are spacious with fine artwork, statues, old buildings along and surrounding North Terrace particularly, regal old buildings lovingly restored, parade like the aristocrats they are. Heritage in use. Torrens Park, the exhibition centre, bandstand and pleasures boats at one end, Donald Bradman and St Peters Cathedral the other. People come to walk, play, rest, eat. Central Market struck me as possibly the best in Australia.

Why has Hobart nothing like this? Salamanca, yes, St David's Park, then what? Mona, but that's different again.

The Ghan

So let's cheer up and board the Ghan. We gape as we see it at the station, 660 m long. Our cabin attendant Nicci is cheerful and helpful. We slowly pass through the suburbs, some nice farm scenery and then its semi desert and dinnertime: superb soft, moist barramundi.



First stop Alice Springs. Or rather just before Alice Springs. Years of drought followed by over a year of almost continuous rain then a dry frosty winter – a perfect recipe for bushfires. Fire both sides of the track, deliberately lit. The heat had buckled the rails but enough to allow us to proceed? It took 4.5 hours to decide that we could.



In Alice we saw a reptile farm. Do goannas run up you thinking you are tree? That's what I'd been told. Not true, we were assured. There aren't any trees in the desert so they can't think you are what they've never seen. But they have ears. If a snake or goanna is nearby: don't move. They'll think you are a rock or a dead tree and move away. Move and they sense it immediately—and strike. Their urine is solid uric acid you might like to know. Terry the saltie needs only a chicken a week. And contrary to legend, they don't store meat in the river bank, they kill for territorial reasons not food

We visit the Flying Doctor museum, old Alice gaol, a women's memorial for outstanding women. The Telegraph Station in Morse code days was the only information conduit to the whole of Australia. It was important for boosting messages and was manned 24 hrs round the clock. Memorial was at the Station to the stolen generation, as explained to us by one of them. A lookout shows us Alice from above at sunset. In the town there are murals of the Afghan camel trains, from which the Ghan derives its name.



Next stop Katherine and Katherine Gorge. Katherine as a town is flat and dull, recently recovered from massive floods that saw crocodiles lurking in the main street. The drawcard is Katherine Gorge, very picturesque. We board boats that take us to a walking trail to see aboriginal paintings. On the way back we pass a rock from which an aboriginal actor jumped to his death, but I've forgotten the name of the film.

We overnight in Darwin, up early next morning we go on our APT tour of Kakadu. First stop to see some aboriginal paintings, all carefully explained. We are to see other and different paintings on the Kimberley trip. The bus takes us East into Kakadu pausing at various viewpoints and a rich wetland and bird sanctuary, with a boat cruise along the wetlands, with crocodiles yawning at us from the banks. We spend the night at Jabiru inside an enormous kitsch crocodile hotel decorated with some outstanding aboriginal art.



Next day we travel east to the East Alligator River, where the tide races in bringing crocodiles with it and an hour later races out. We are ordered to stand a good twenty metres away from the water's edge, but that doesn't seem to worry some with latent suicidal tendencies. We visit an aboriginal arts centre, where they are at work painting and designing. We have the long trek back to Darwin, stopping only to see some more cave painting, this one of a ship, and how marriages were arranged. The young man who could lodge his spear in the corner of this rock got to marry the chief's daughter.



This final leg, lasting some 4-5 hours, is rather testing. The air-conditioning is

straight from Antarctica, over which our driver Neil insists he has no control. He also has a passion for loud fifties and sixties music which his passengers don't share. We ask him to turn it down, but it gradually sneaks back up to earsplitting level again. I was so annoyed I wrote to the company complaining. Here is part of their reply:

I have spoken to Neil about this and the music and it is what he calls his golden oldies (hits of the 50s and 60s) play list that he has never had a problem with this cd in the past. When he was asked to turn down the music he says that he did, then following that he had some of the other customers complain that they couldn't hear the music.

I have advised that yes it is a long day and there will be times where it is inappropriate to have the music during the tour and to be wary of how loud he plays the music as well.

So now it's safe to go with Neil to Kakadu.

To be honest, we found that trip basically disappointing, quite apart from the Guantanamo Bay conditions; that is, being subjected to intolerable levels of cold and noise. We drove right past the turn off to Jim Jim Falls, one of the sights of Kakadu. No time to stop.

We had allowed two days for Darwin but as it was we had virtually no time in Darwin. Some advice: if you have two days in Darwin, make sure you only spend only one in Kakadu, unless you have a particular interest. Better still, spend all the time in Darwin; there's a lot to offer, so we were told.

The Kimberley Coast on the *Oceanic Discoverer*



We board the *Oceanic Discoverer* and set sail at 11 am along with 30 or so fellow passengers. Lunch and then briefing: Trish our purser, Steve our tour leader, Damon and Mike expert guest lecturers.



Next day we board the *Xplorer*, basically a bus-sized zodiac, that spends its time at sea suspended above a platform at the stern of the ship. We board it from an upper deck and then it is lowered onto the platform and into the water. Up the King George River, with towering sandstone cliffs and remarkable patterns, including some wildlife. At the end of the Gorge there is usually a tremendous waterfall, but in September there wasn't much water left.



We then walk off the *Xplorer* to secluded and well-named Tranquil Bay. It wasn't very tranquil in February 1942, when the SS Koolama sailed from Fremantle to Darwin with army, civilian and convicts on board. It was attacked by Japanese aircraft, causing severe damage. Captain Eggleston beached the ship at



Koolama Bay beside Tranquil Bay and did rough repairs to sail the ship to Wyndham to be properly repaired. First officer Reynolds disagreed, saying the ship was unseaworthy and they all should make their way by land. This was the so-called Koolama mutiny. Half the crew followed Reynolds the other half stayed with Captain Eggleston. A lugger from a nearby Drysdale River Mission appeared and took the sick, while the rest walked 100 km to the Mission. Meantime, the Koolama was made just seaworthy, and with pumps running full blast managed to reach Wyndham, taking on lots of water. They unloaded the cargo of



military goods, when the Japanese strafed Wyndham. The ship sank. One man was badly wounded but lived to old age, and one person died on the way to Drysdale River Mission. An enquiry later cleared the crew of mutiny charges and both Eggleston and Reynolds had distinguished naval careers – but they didn't become friends.



Our third day at sea, and we see much ancient artwork at Jar Island, called Gwion Gwion art. Back on board for lunch, then by Xplorer to the Anjo Peninsula to find a C-53 wrecked in 1942, which seems a variant of the DC-3. I couldn't find any more details about this: at nearby Truscott airfield that were numerous crashes but not of a C-53. That evening we go to the library and listen the day's recap by Damon the funny man to Mike's straight man. This is a nightly feature, which usefully consolidates the events of the day.

Next day we are offered the choice of a helicopter flight to Mitchell Falls well inland or a cruise into the hinterland behind Wilkanyan. To make the decision, we say if the flight is more than \$350 pp then we take the cruise, for anyway it is the dry season and the falls won't be much. The flight was \$450. A mistake as it happened as the falls were very dramatic, even if low at this time of year. We go to Hathaway's Hideaway to see some fine rocks, while others stay on board to go ... wait for it, this an eco-trip – fishing! But at least they threw them back, albeit with very sore mouths. The fish that is. Cruise around Wilkanyan, beachcombing, with some nice shells somebody has put on display. We pass an osprey nest, and our guide Mike takes better shots of the birds than I could. Then it's party time on Verandah Beach.



We had to have a long breakfast next morning to wait for tide to be right to go to Bigge Island. The coast is composed of King Leopold sandstone. We land on a sandy beach which has turtle tracks, a bird, a crocodile, and a lucky crocodile. More aboriginal art, rather later and more elaborate than previous art, Wandjina figures: Clear evidence of European invasion, ships, a man with a hat and smoking a large pipe. We enter a large cave

with beautiful stained patterns, and terrific acoustics, Steve ask if anyone can sing. Bridget, I'll call her Bridget, said she could sing. So she sang 'Amazing Grace'. She sang it again, and again and again while the cave, gradually emptied. We explore the beach, with different plants and evidence of birds and animals, including the Monjong wallaby. Return to drinks on the deck while sun sets over North Maret Island, the target of oil and gas mining. At least since then Tony Burke has declared a marine sanctuary near this region.



Early start, cruising up the Hunter River into Porosis Creek, spectacular mangroves with mud skippers, red crabs, and big saltie, plus bird life. Then to an unnamed island with art sites. After lunch on board we go to Careening Bay, where Philip Parker King had to careen his boat the Mermaid in 1820. He carved the name of his ship on a Boab Tree, as have others since. Careening bay is lush with cycads, flowering gums.

Next day we sail into St Georges Basin and up the mighty Prince Regent River to the King Cascade falls. Mike's camera again catches some birdlife at the top of the

falls. In 1987 a young American girl, Ginger Faye Meadows, stood on the bottom step of the falls within easy reach of a crocodile. Her body was later found in a nearby mangrove inlet. We spent the afternoon cruising to Three Ways Creek and went croc spotting at night.

This is now Day 8, 7th October, on board the Ocean Discoverer. Some bird watching on a small island, then to Raft Point to a small beach. We walk up to some caves for more Wandjina Rock Art. This figure somehow reminds me of the name Beijing gave to Chris Pattern, Hong Kong's last Governor: "The Triple Violator". We were told about some of the finer features and history, but I didn't take notes and I fear I have forgotten.



We come across Montgomery Reef as the tide was falling. Normally it would be submerged but at this moment it is shedding water. A turtle is left stranded. It would die if left so Mike and the boys go to the rescue.



Early morning start to massive Talbot Bay home to hundreds, thousand of islands. At the far end are the famous Horizontal waterfalls by zodiac. The falls are formed by two massive walls forming a narrow passage into the large inlet. At the turn of tide, the "waterfalls" really are horizontal, and bumpy when you take them at speed by zodiac. Which we did, time after time. We

return to the ship to find we are attacked by large nursery sharks but they turn out to be pussy cats. They only want to nuzzle amongst our legs and eat fish we hand out to them. Some fantastic metamorphic rock formations alongside Cyclone Creek plus some Kimberley roses, short eared rock wallaby and lots of birds.

We pass one of the glories of the Kimberley Coast: large scale open cut mining, which is on a much grander scale today than it was two years ago.



On our final day we go to the Lacapede Islands, a group of low sandy island that are home to many birds: lesser frigate birds, common noddies, Caspian terns, crested terns, silver gulls, pelicans, pied cormorants, sooty oystercatchers and pied oystercatchers. Now spot them!

We disembark at Broome at a very long jetty. We say goodbye to our crew, and we have a last long look from above as we fly to Perth.

